



Dogs on Duty

**A Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire
Awareness Campaign on Discrimination
and Access for People who own
Assistance Dogs**

October 2025

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Campaign Overview

‘Dogs on Duty’ is an awareness and advocacy campaign that shines a light on the discrimination faced by individuals who own assistance dogs, such as guide dogs, autism support, emotional support and therapy dogs.

Sparked by a local incident in Leighton Buzzard where a man with sight loss was removed from a Wetherspoons pub for being accompanied by his registered guide dog, this campaign aims to challenge stigma, educate the public, and promote inclusion across Central Bedfordshire and beyond.

Wetherspoons has faced repeated criticism for refusing entry or mistreating customers with assistance dogs, despite exemptions under the Equality Act 2010.

In Newcastle, a 19-year-old was denied access with their psychiatric assistance dog, with Wetherspoons later admitting it was a *“genuine error.”* In Devon, a man relying on his dog Henry was humiliated after being asked for ID to prove its status. In Hanley and Northallerton, disabled customers were challenged or asked to leave despite showing credentials, leaving them feeling discriminated against.

These incidents highlight ongoing misunderstandings of assistance dog rights, inconsistent policy enforcement, and the damaging impact refusals have on disabled people’s confidence and wellbeing.



Executive Summary

The Assistance Dog Awareness Campaign was designed to raise understanding of the legal rights of people using assistance dogs, to highlight real-life experiences of discrimination and inclusion, and to promote empathy, accessibility, and informed practice among local businesses. A further aim was to empower members of the public to act as allies in disability advocacy and to help shift community conversations towards greater inclusion.

To achieve these aims, a series of activities were delivered. Central to the campaign was the **'Walk Alongside Day'**, during which Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (HWCB) staff and colleagues accompanied assistance dog users as they visited a range of public venues in Leighton Buzzard town centre, including cafés, shops, parks and public transport. This provided first-hand insights into the barriers faced by assistance dog users, allowed volunteers to reflect on these experiences, and generated content to support the campaign.

The campaign was also supported by a local awareness initiative which included the design and distribution of posters and window stickers for businesses. These carried messages such as **'Assistance Dogs Welcome Here'** alongside key facts about access rights. Venues that demonstrated good practice were highlighted as champions of inclusion and encouraged to act as role models for others. Businesses were further supported with downloadable badges and certificates to display their commitment.

Another important strand of the campaign involved the collection of personal stories from assistance dog users.



These were captured in a variety of formats including audio, video, and short written quotes, and were shared through social media channels using the hashtag **#DogsOnDuty**.

Stories showcased both positive and negative experiences in public spaces and helped to challenge common myths, such as the misconception that emotional support dogs are 'pets.'

The campaign was delivered collaboratively. HWCB staff, Directors and volunteers led the project, developed materials and coordinated activities, while assistance dog users shared their experiences and helped shape campaign priorities. Local businesses engaged by displaying posters and stickers, and the wider public were encouraged to interact with the campaign online and in person.



The campaign achieved several positive outcomes. Local businesses reported greater awareness of their legal responsibilities and of practical steps they could take to make their venues more welcoming.

Members of the public were empowered to support disability inclusion, and assistance dog users reported feeling more visible and supported within their communities. The campaign also encouraged conversations around empathy and understanding, shifting attitudes at a community level.



Evaluation of the project was conducted through feedback from assistance dog users, monitoring of social media engagement, and records of the number of businesses displaying materials or pledging their support. A final campaign roundup was also shared with stakeholders and community partners.

The impacts of the campaign have been wide-ranging. Public awareness of the Equality Act 2010 and the rights of assistance dog users has increased, while myths and misconceptions have been actively challenged.

Businesses and public venues have taken steps to improve accessibility, leading to fewer incidents of discrimination and greater confidence for assistance dog users in their daily lives.

Healthwatch volunteers have developed valuable skills in advocacy, campaigning, and inclusive communication, positioning the organisation as a strong ally in promoting disability rights. Importantly, assistance dog users, including those with invisible disabilities, have felt more supported, valued, and visible in their communities.

The campaign has also fostered stronger partnerships between HWCB, assistance dog organisations, and local businesses, creating a foundation for ongoing collaboration on accessibility and inclusion.

In summary, the campaign has successfully delivered a multi-channel awareness initiative that combined posters, stickers, social media content, and personal stories. It has resulted in increased engagement with local disability rights organisations, strengthened community partnerships, and a positive shift in local attitudes towards accessibility and inclusion.



Full Report

 Guide
Dogs

 Dogs

Background

Assistance dogs play a vital role in enabling disabled people to access services and live independently. Despite clear protections under the Equality Act 2010, which makes it unlawful to refuse entry or provide a 'worse service' to an individual accompanied by a trained assistance dog, incidents of discrimination remain common. Such refusals not only breach legal duties but also undermine disabled people's confidence, independence, and wellbeing.

To date, HWCB has not carried out any dedicated national research into the experiences of assistance dog owners. Although national reports have explored issues such as communication barriers, social care, and access to health services, the specific rights and experiences of assistance dog users have not been a central focus. Some local Healthwatch in other parts of England may hold relevant case studies or insights, but these have not been collated or prioritised nationally. This creates a gap in evidence and advocacy, despite the significant impact that access refusals continue to have on disabled people.

The Dogs on Duty campaign was launched to confront discrimination against people who rely on assistance dogs, raising awareness and pressing for change. Its origins lie in Central Bedfordshire, following a local incident in Leighton Buzzard where a man with sight loss was ejected from a Wetherspoons pub despite being accompanied by his registered guide dog. This was not an isolated case: Wetherspoons and other businesses have repeatedly faced criticism for refusing access to assistance dog owners, with similar incidents reported in Newcastle, Devon, Hanley, and Northallerton.

In each instance, individuals were subjected to unnecessary challenges, demands for identification, or outright denial of entry. These examples highlight a persistent pattern of unlawful and harmful behaviour, underlining the urgent need for stronger awareness, accountability, and enforcement, the very aims at the heart of the Dogs on Duty campaign.

Together, these cases highlight widespread misunderstandings of assistance dog rights, inconsistent enforcement of the law, and the damaging consequences of access refusals. They also reinforce the urgent need for greater public awareness and stronger accountability, alongside the amplification of lived experience at a national level. Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire is well placed to lead this work, building on local initiatives like Dogs on Duty and addressing the current gap in national evidence, to ensure that assistance dog users are not only recognised within health and social care policy but actively supported to exercise their rights.



Summary of Initial Discussions

The early stages of Dogs on Duty focused on listening, learning, and laying strong foundations for change. Initial discussions explored the legal framework, engagement priorities, and methods for raising awareness, while also identifying the barriers faced by assistance dog users in everyday settings. What emerged was a clear picture: although businesses and public services often want to be inclusive, a lack of awareness, training, and confidence continues to result in unlawful refusals and damaging experiences. The following summary outlines the campaign's approach, findings, and recommendations.

Legal and Rights Framework

The campaign was grounded in the Equality Act 2010, which requires businesses to allow access for guide and assistance dogs. To reinforce this, laminated copies of the Act were distributed to venues, ensuring Managers and staff could refer directly to the legislation. Awareness-raising efforts highlighted that access refusals are unlawful and can amount to discrimination, while discussions also included calls for Central Bedfordshire Council to take an active role in addressing incidents.

Focus of Engagement

Engagement targeted venues where access challenges are most likely to occur, including cafés, food shops, chemists, independent businesses, charity shops, taxi ranks, and bus stations. Pilot activity took place at the local library, Salisbury House, and health clinics on Basset Road. By engaging both small independent venues and public institutions, the campaign aimed to build awareness at both local and national levels.

Project Delivery

Activities ran between 10am and 4pm with participation from dog handlers, assistance dogs, support workers, HWCB staff and Directors, Central Bedfordshire Council representatives, Police Community Officers, the Mayor of Luton Borough, and local community officers. Staff worked in pairs, one interviewer and one note-taker, to ensure consistency and accuracy. All participants wore HWCB uniforms with Sight Concern branding, providing clear visibility and recognition throughout the day.

Engagement Approach

A structured interview process guided discussions with businesses. Five core questions explored awareness and attitudes: knowledge of access rights, whether assistance dogs were permitted, treatment of customers with assistance dogs, perceived challenges or barriers, and whether the business wished to be highlighted as a positive example. Open conversation was encouraged to capture experiences in more depth. The emphasis was on positive first interactions, with practical support provided through posters, stickers, QR codes, and leaflets.



Awareness Raising and Communication

The campaign linked local incidents of discrimination to the wider Bedford Inclusive Town Project, underlining the need for community-wide change. Awareness materials, including HWCB leaflets, posters, and stickers, were distributed across venues, and the use of sunflower lanyards was considered as a widely recognised accessibility tool. Positive examples were showcased, such as Clintons in Bedford and Luton Town Football Club, with success stories promoted through Facebook and local community networks.

Challenges and Barriers Identified

Engagement revealed that refusals remain common, often expressed as **“you can’t bring that in here.”** Many businesses and frontline staff lacked awareness of legal obligations, while practical issues, such as poor lighting in shops for people with sight loss, added to accessibility barriers. National chains generally had clearer policies and training, while smaller independent businesses often lacked guidance. The need to train active bystanders to intervene confidently during incidents of discrimination was also identified as a priority.

Recommendations Moving Forward

To build on early progress, the following actions were recommended:

- ◆ Provide businesses with clear information about assistance dog uniforms and equipment to reduce confusion and support correct identification.
- ◆ Develop practical resources for staff and Managers, including:
 - ◇ Policy guides
 - ◇ Training opportunities
 - ◇ Summaries of the Equality Act 2010
- ◆ Encourage businesses to display stickers and posters as visible signs of inclusion.
- ◆ Frame engagement with businesses as supportive and collaborative, while maintaining accountability for compliance with the law.
- ◆ Link the campaign to wider initiatives on sight loss and accessibility in Bedford and Luton to ensure consistency and maximise impact.

Conclusion

The initial discussions highlighted the value of a structured awareness campaign that combines education, community engagement, and enforcement of legal rights. By balancing support for businesses with accountability under the Equality Act, and by showcasing positive examples of inclusion, the project is helping to shift local culture towards greater accessibility and understanding.

Working Example: ‘Everyone Is Welcome Here – Including Assistance Dogs’

This sample statement illustrates how businesses can put inclusion into practice. It provides a clear, friendly message that reassures customers while showing compliance with the Equality Act 2010.

Everyone Is Welcome Here – Including Assistance Dogs

We want everyone to feel welcome in our premises. That’s why we follow the Equality Act 2010, which protects people with disabilities from discrimination.

What this means for you:

- ◆ If you have a disability, you have the right to access our venue like anyone else.
- ◆ We will make reasonable adjustments to make your visit easier and more enjoyable.
- ◆ This always includes welcoming guide dogs and other trained assistance dogs.

About Assistance Dogs:

- ◆ Assistance dogs are highly trained to support people with a range of disabilities, including sight loss, hearing loss, physical disabilities, autism, epilepsy, diabetes, and PTSD.
- ◆ Assistance dogs are welcome in all public areas of our premises.
- ◆ You will never be asked to pay extra or leave your dog outside.

Our Promise:

- ◆ Our staff are trained to understand assistance dog rights.
- ◆ We aim to keep our space safe, accessible, and welcoming for everyone.
- ◆ If you need help during your visit, please let a member of our team know.

You — and your assistance dog — are always welcome here.



I felt it was important that as Leader of the Council and an active volunteer for 'Dogs for Good' myself, it is a matter that I strongly believe in.

It was good to have the opportunity to visit many local businesses with a team of such dedicated and enthusiastic individuals to help ensure that everyone that we spoke to knew how to recognise an 'assistance dog' and the importance of allowing them and their owners full access to their business. We were able to leave supporting information for their staff to help aid recognition and site window stickers in many outlets to confirm that access dogs are welcome. We often forget how important these dogs are to their owners in allowing them to do things that many of us take for granted. I was delighted to lend my support and thank everyone involved for their ongoing commitment.

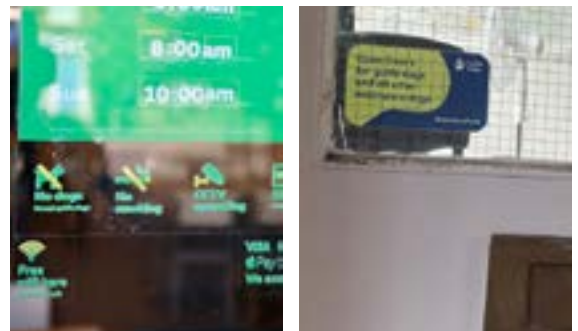
Cllr Nigel Carnell, Leader of
Leighton-Linslade Town Council

Summary of Guide Dogs Consultation

In August 2025, HWCB met with Guide Dogs UK to discuss the continuing problem of assistance dog access refusals. The consultation highlighted several pressing issues and provided valuable insights into both the scale of the problem and potential ways forward. Access refusals remain a significant barrier for guide dog owners, who continue to experience discrimination in venues such as restaurants, hotels, and particularly in chains such as Wetherspoons. Excuses frequently cited by businesses, such as allergies, fear of dogs, or cultural objections, were emphasised as not legally valid under the Equality Act 2010. The impact of these refusals extends far beyond inconvenience, severely undermining the confidence, independence, mobility, mental health, and wellbeing of those who rely on guide dogs for daily life.

The scale of the issue is reflected in the number of complaints received by Guide Dogs UK. Since July alone, 14 complaints were recorded in relation to access refusals, alongside a further 15 complaints involving taxis. While the hot summer weather reduced the number of journeys made by dog owners, since dogs cannot safely work in high heat, the problem remains persistent. The consultation also noted a worrying decline in the number of working guide dogs in the UK, which has fallen from 5,200 pre-pandemic to around 3,000 today. Given that approximately £100,000 is invested in every guide dog partnership, refusals undermine not only individual wellbeing but also substantial public and charitable investment.

The legal and policy framework is clear. Equality law is anticipatory, requiring service providers to prepare in advance to accommodate disabled people and their assistance dogs. Larger chains often have HR and legal teams to advise them, while smaller independent businesses are more prone to breaches due to lack of awareness or support. Organisations such as Assistance Dogs UK (ADUK), Guide Dogs UK, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) provide resources including quick guides, policy templates, and window stickers, but these are not yet consistently adopted across the business community.



Several challenges and misunderstandings persist. The rise in self-trained assistance dogs, which have the same access rights but no legally recognised definition, has created uncertainty among service providers. In some cases, refusals are wrongly considered 'reasonable', and the absence of significant legal cases has given businesses scope to disregard their responsibilities.

Cultural and social factors also influence attitudes towards assistance dogs. For instance, some young Muslim women have expressed fear of dogs, reflecting wider cultural perceptions. The campaign group emphasised the need to respond with sensitivity and education, rather than confrontation. Encouragingly, children were seen to be more open and curious, suggesting that early education could play a key role in shifting attitudes across generations.



The consultation also shed light on the personal toll faced by guide dog owners. Many enter venues **“bracing for impact,”** anxious about being challenged or turned away. Some owners have resorted to wearing GoPro cameras as a form of protection and evidence gathering. Personal testimonies conveyed deep frustration and despair, including one owner who described considering giving up their guide dog altogether because **“it’s too hard.”** Others reported restricting themselves only to familiar venues to avoid the risk of confrontation.

A range of practical solutions were suggested. Providing businesses with images of approved harnesses and equipment could help staff identify genuine assistance dogs more confidently. Free sighted guide training, offered both virtually and in person, was highlighted as a valuable resource. Campaigns that use ‘fun facts’ and positive customer service messages could reframe accessibility as an opportunity to improve inclusion rather than a legal burden. Involving children and young people in awareness-raising activities was seen as a particularly effective way of building a more inclusive culture.

The discussion also broadened beyond businesses to the wider built environment. Pavement parking, e-scooters, and street clutter were identified as ongoing dangers for both guide dog owners and wheelchair users. Barriers at bus stops and broken infrastructure further reduced independence. These issues point to the need for stronger engagement with local authorities and the integration of access campaigns within broader pan-disability initiatives.

In conclusion, despite clear legal protections, access refusals remain widespread and deeply damaging. They undermine confidence and independence, erode the effectiveness of costly guide dog partnerships, and perpetuate discrimination. The consultation with Guide Dogs UK underscored the urgent need for greater education, policy support, cultural sensitivity, and sustained awareness campaigns. By working together across businesses, healthcare providers, local authorities, and disability organisations, there is an opportunity to build a more inclusive environment where guide dog users can live and move with dignity, safety, and independence.



Dogs on Duty Campaign – Walk Alongside Day

Preparations Prior to the Day

In preparation for the Walk Alongside Day, Young Healthwatch volunteers met with HWCB staff, Directors, and other volunteers to shape the project. Their consultation highlighted the importance of raising local awareness, noting that even small actions can have a big impact. Participants agreed that sharing personal stories and building relationships with local businesses are key to fostering a more inclusive community. They also stressed the value of role models in advocating for change, as lived experiences help people connect on a personal level and make it more likely that attitudes and behaviours will shift over time.

Social media was identified as a key platform for promotion, particularly Instagram, where a compilation of images and videos from the day could be shared. The group recommended colourful and engaging media, including posters, badges, and photos of assistance dogs, to encourage people to share campaign content and get involved in their local communities.



Feedback also raised the need to balance inclusion with sensitivity for those who are fearful of dogs. The campaign sought to create spaces where assistance dogs are welcomed, while also ensuring that other members of the public feel safe and comfortable.

Concerns about campaign materials were addressed directly. Some volunteers worried that posters displayed in shop windows might not be visible or could be ignored. To strengthen visibility, HWCB consulted with Guide Dogs UK and obtained official stickers, which are small, recognisable, and easy for businesses to display. Where businesses initially claimed that **“all dogs are welcome,”** the team engaged in conversations to explain why visibly supporting assistance dogs is important, even when venues are already pet friendly. Poster designs were reviewed in line with feedback from Young Healthwatch volunteers to ensure maximum impact.

One serious issue that arose during preparations was an access refusal at The Hunt Lodge (hotel in Leighton Buzzard). When requesting a room for a Healthwatch North Yorkshire Volunteer and her assistance dog, Comet, the booking was rejected. The stated reason was that the venue did not allow dogs, including assistance dogs, due to **“allergies.”** When it was explained that Comet was not a pet but a trained assistance dog, the refusal was repeated, with the Manager cited as the decision-maker. This incident highlighted the ongoing problem of unlawful refusals despite clear protections under the Equality Act 2010.

On the Day

The 'Walk Alongside Day' took place on 22nd September 2025. The HWCB team met with volunteers, including the Healthwatch North Yorkshire Volunteer and her assistance dog Comet, at Costa Coffee to begin the day. Packs containing stickers, posters, and badges were shared, along with information resources designed to support local businesses.

The Healthwatch North Yorkshire Volunteer shared her previous experiences of campaigning with Comet, where she regularly engaged with members of the public in hospital settings. Her role included educating people about the rights of assistance dog users and raising awareness of how public spaces can be made more inclusive. The team drew on this experience to guide their approach in Leighton Buzzard, combining education with direct engagement to highlight both positive and negative stories.

Throughout the day, volunteers distributed campaign materials, shared their own experiences, and encouraged open conversations with businesses. The aim was not only to raise awareness of legal obligations but also to build empathy and understanding, particularly by introducing members of the public to Comet. In doing so, the campaign made assistance dogs more visible, familiar, and accepted within the community.

After consulting with a Healthwatch North Yorkshire volunteer, we convened a meeting that brought together a range of stakeholders: Sight Concern volunteers (including the individual who experienced the original incident with Wetherspoons and his guide dog, Stanton), a HWCB Director, the Mayor of Leighton Buzzard, a Central Bedfordshire Council member, a Town Council member, a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO), and a 13-year-old Young Healthwatch volunteer.



The Young Healthwatch volunteer distributed resource packs which contained:

- ◆ A map of the walking route
- ◆ Assistance Dogs UK (ADUK) quick guides (for welcoming customers, holiday accommodation, police, and policy writing)
- ◆ A poster illustrating the different types of trained assistance dogs
- ◆ A "Walk Alongside Day" quick guide outlining conversation tips and roles for the day
- ◆ A volunteer script
- ◆ Badges created by Young Healthwatch
- ◆ Stickers from Guide Dogs UK
- ◆ A notepad and ID badges

We divided into three groups: two accompanied by an assistance dog and one without.

Each group was allocated a mapped route through the town, visiting all open shops and businesses along the way. On entering, groups either followed the prepared script or spoke conversationally about the campaign. They first asked staff if they had time to talk, after which the Young Healthwatch volunteer explained the purpose of the campaign and handed out guides, stickers, posters, and badges.

Businesses visited

The visits covered a wide range of venues, from cafés and opticians to estate agents, pubs, and community services, reflecting the campaign's aim to engage businesses across all parts of local life, including:

Cafés & Food

- ◆ Lauren's Café
- ◆ Espresso Head Café
- ◆ Community Fridge
- ◆ Miller's
- ◆ Cittadina

Hospitality

- ◆ Picturehouse Pub

Health & Care

- ◆ King's Eyecare
- ◆ Boots Opticians
- ◆ Sue Ryder Hospice

Personal Services

- ◆ A dry cleaners
- ◆ Tiptop Nails
- ◆ King's Barber
- ◆ A phone repair shop

Shops & Services

- ◆ Carpets and Flooring by John Wright
- ◆ Perfect Parties shop
- ◆ TR Furniture
- ◆ Lock Services
- ◆ M&M Estate Agents
- ◆ CeeJay
- ◆ Michael Anthony Estate Agents
- ◆ Stephen Alan Jewellers



At Espresso Head Café, a member of the public overheard the conversation and engaged with the group. She raised a common concern that shops and businesses might not always be suitable for assistance dogs. However, she was open and supportive, and welcomed the opportunity to discuss potential barriers faced by assistance dog users.

At the Picturehouse Pub, staff asked how to identify an assistance dog and distinguish them from pets. We provided ADUK guides, which were well received. The owner explained that they already welcomed assistance dogs in training and wanted further guidance on best practice to ensure access.

Sue Ryder displayed incorrect signage stating, 'Guide Dogs Only'. However, staff inside were very welcoming, allowed all assistance dogs, and even provided treats. They acknowledged the signage issue and were keen to replace it with the correct Guide Dogs sticker. Subway displayed similar incorrect signage, though they too permitted access for all assistance dogs.

McGuigan Cecily staff were enthusiastic, immediately stopping what they were doing to meet Comet. They engaged with the information, asked questions, and expressed genuine interest in supporting the campaign.

At Stephen Alan Jewellers, staff joked that they **"preferred dogs to people"** and were eager to learn about Comet's training as an autism and heart condition assistance dog. They quickly displayed the sticker and welcomed the resources.

Michael Anthoney Estate Agents demonstrated exceptional enthusiasm. As soon as the group entered, the Manager asked all five staff to gather around and listen to the Young Healthwatch volunteer and Youth Engagement Officer. Staff eagerly took badges, put them on immediately, and engaged fully in the discussion. One volunteer reflected that **"they couldn't have been more enthusiastic if they tried."**

TR Furniture were similarly proactive, putting the sticker on their door straight away, taking resources, and proudly wearing badges. At Selections Pet and Garden Stores, staff greeted Comet with a treat, received the campaign information positively, and displayed the sticker immediately.

Many of the businesses visited were unaware of the incident at Wetherspoons and expressed shock that such an illegal policy had been in place locally. Overall, the reception was very positive. People in Leighton Buzzard were keen to show support, described by one volunteer as having 'listened with care'. Businesses were especially encouraging of the younger volunteers' involvement in delivering information. Where incorrect information or signage was identified, staff responded promptly, apologised for any misunderstanding, and committed to making improvements.



The Mayor and Leader of Leighton-Linslade Town Council were delighted to be invited to join Young Healthwatch in their 'Dogs on Duty' campaign recently.

Many High Street businesses were visited during the morning, and most were very happy to see working dogs with their pawrents accompany them into their premises. Nearly everyone understood their commitment to people with various needs, requiring the support of their canine companions which was very encouraging.

Many window stickers demonstrating their commitment to 'Dogs on Duty' were handed out to the businesses that were visited and it's great to see them on display.

It is hoped that all businesses will respond positively to this initiative and warmly welcome those needing assistance dogs to visit their premises.

Cllr David Bligh, Mayor of Leighton-Linslade Town Council

At the end of the activity, the whole group visited Wetherspoons to assess their policy and response to assistance dog users, following the access refusal case previously raised by Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire and Guide Dogs UK. Disappointingly, the policy remained unlawful: entry was still conditional on assistance dogs being accompanied by ID. This is not a legal requirement, as under the Equality Act 2010 businesses must make reasonable adjustments by permitting access to assistance dogs without requiring proof of ID. The Manager's response was defensive and at times hostile, even directly addressing the man previously refused entry with, ***"I remember you and the complaint."***

Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire continues to work in partnership with Sight Concern, Guide Dogs UK, and Assistance Dogs UK to advocate for Wetherspoons to update their policy and improve their approach to supporting assistance dog users.

By the end of the day, volunteers had distributed:

- ◆ 60 Guide Dogs window stickers for businesses to display
- ◆ 45 policy information packs from Assistance Dogs UK
- ◆ 22 badges created by Young Healthwatch volunteers



Recommendations

Building on the findings of the campaign, these recommendations are designed to consolidate progress, reduce misunderstandings, and promote long-term change. They focus on strengthening business engagement, raising public awareness, addressing ongoing challenges with Wetherspoons, and embedding assistance dog rights into wider accessibility strategies.

1

Business Engagement and Support

- ◆ Build on the strong positive response from local businesses by maintaining regular engagement.
- ◆ Provide clear, accessible information about assistance dog rights – emphasising that owners are not legally required to show ID – to reduce misunderstandings and support compliance.
- ◆ Encourage businesses to display Guide Dogs window stickers as a visible sign of their commitment to accessibility and inclusion.

2

Public Awareness and Education

- ◆ Increase community understanding of assistance dog access rights through local campaigns, social media, and press coverage.
- ◆ Share positive examples of inclusive businesses to showcase good practice and inspire others to follow suit.

3

Wetherspoons Policy and Practice

- ◆ Work with Guide Dogs UK, Assistance Dogs UK, and Sight Concern to press for Wetherspoons to update its policy in line with the Equality Act 2010.
- ◆ Recommend staff training across all branches to ensure consistent knowledge of assistance dog rights.
- ◆ Encourage senior management to collaborate with advocacy organisations to prevent future refusals.

4

Partnership Development

- ◆ Explore opportunities to collaborate with local councils, town centre management, and business forums so that awareness of assistance dog rights is integrated into wider accessibility and inclusion strategies.
- ◆ Encourage local authorities and business networks to endorse and share resources developed by Guide Dogs UK and Assistance Dogs UK.

5

Monitoring and Follow-up

- ◆ Introduce a light-touch follow-up process with businesses that received information and stickers, to reinforce learning and assess impact.
- ◆ Continue recording and reporting future instances of non-compliance, using this evidence to strengthen advocacy and escalate concerns where necessary.





Assistance Dogs and the Law

The Equality Act 2010 protects people in the UK from discrimination based on protected characteristics, including disability. It applies to all public services and venues, from shops and cafés to healthcare and transport. Service providers must not refuse entry, offer a 'worse service', or treat a disabled person unfavourably. They also have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments so disabled people can access goods, services, and facilities. Importantly, these duties are anticipatory: providers must plan ahead to meet disabled people's needs, not only respond when issues arise.

Refusing entry to a disabled person accompanied by a trained assistance dog is unlawful discrimination. Assistance dogs are not pets, they are highly trained to support people with sight loss, hearing loss, physical disabilities, autism, epilepsy, diabetes, PTSD, and more. Businesses cannot require them to be left outside, restrict them to certain areas without justification, or charge extra. Access may only be limited in rare situations (e.g. sterile hospital areas), and providers must then make alternative arrangements.

For businesses, this means:

- ◆ Ensuring staff understand assistance dog rights and etiquette
- ◆ Keeping entrances and walkways accessible
- ◆ Avoiding unnecessary questioning (owners are not legally required to show ID)
- ◆ Displaying "Assistance Dogs Welcome" signage as a visible commitment to inclusion

Guidance from Guide Dogs UK confirms that food hygiene rules do not prevent assistance dogs in customer areas. Dogs trained through accredited schemes are clean, well-behaved, and non-disruptive. Practical adjustments include supporting customers to locate products, offering sighted guiding, and ensuring clear walkways.

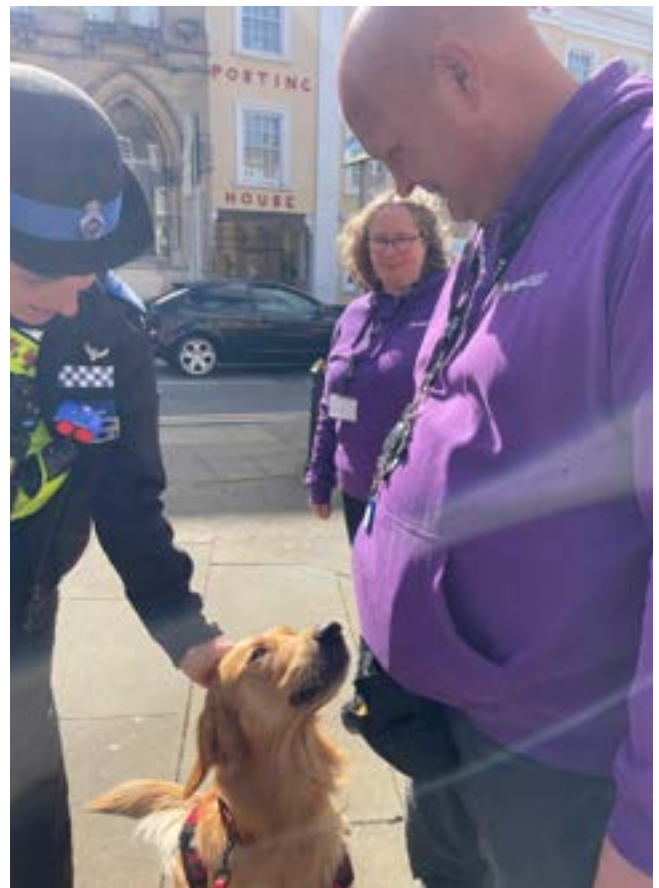
The Open Doors Campaign further raises awareness, helping businesses pledge support with free stickers, training, and recognition guides. Refusals remain unlawful under the Equality Act 2010 (UK), the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Northern Ireland), and the Equality Act 2017 (Isle of Man). Cultural objections, allergies, or fear of dogs are not valid grounds for refusal. Instead, reasonable adjustments, such as cleaning measures or air purifiers, should be made.

Healthcare settings are also covered. Hospitals, GP surgeries, dentists, and ambulance services must adapt "no dogs" policies, flag access needs in patient records, and make safe arrangements if infection control prevents entry. Religious or cultural objections cannot override legal rights.

In summary: refusing entry to a disabled person with an assistance dog is unlawful. Businesses and healthcare providers must anticipate access needs, make reasonable adjustments, and use available resources, such as those from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Assistance Dogs UK, RNIB, and UK Government guidance, to ensure compliance and inclusion.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the success of this campaign. In particular, we are grateful to Healthwatch North Yorkshire, Sight Concern, Central Bedfordshire Council, Leighton Buzzard and Linslade Town Council, the Mayor of Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire Police, and the dedicated Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire volunteers, staff, and Directors. Their commitment, time, and support have been invaluable in helping raise awareness, strengthen partnerships, and champion the rights of assistance dog users in our communities.



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I'll Never See – Film on BBC iPlayer.

Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m002fxv5/our-lives-series-9-the-film-ill-never-see>

Wetherspoons criticised over Northallerton assistance dog incident – BBC News.

Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c7vl74y3mnro>

Social Media Resources

The Healthwatch North Yorkshire Volunteer shared a list of Instagram accounts related to assistance dogs that may be useful, including both organisations and individual handlers. Some accounts focus on the dogs' working lives, while others provide more general content.

Assistance Dog Organisations:

Canine Allies CIC — [Instagram](#)

Adolescent Dogs — [Instagram](#)

RAD Assistance Dogs — [Instagram](#)

Individual Assistance Dog Teams:

Bean (@workingwithbeans) — [Instagram](#)

Ralph (@relyingonralph) — [Instagram](#)

Osha (@osha.the.rotticorso) — [Instagram](#)

Woody (@woody_theassistance_dog) — [Instagram](#)

Ziggy (@ziggymygoldenhero) — [Instagram](#)

Arlo (@arlo.the.assistance.dog) — [Instagram](#)





Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire (YHWCB) exists to make health and social care services work for the people that use them, especially young people.

Our role is to ensure that local decision makers and health and care services put the experiences of young people at the heart of their work.

We believe no one should be afraid to speak up because our opinion is as good as anyone else's.

Our volunteers have received appropriate 'Enter & View' training and are actively putting their learning into practice by visiting health and social care services such as hospital wards, surgeries and care homes. The young people will then be able to report their findings from their unique perspective. If you would like a group of YHWCB volunteers to visit your service please contact us.

A lot more information can be found on the Young Healthwatch website, here <https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/young-healthwatch>, including one volunteer who was successful in applying for nursing college after detailing her experience as a Young Healthwatch volunteer. She explains how pivotal being a volunteer with YHWCB was in supporting her application, showcasing the work she was involved in through YHWCB activities and projects.

If you are under 25, why not consider becoming a member of Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire? Get in touch for more information, email elli.margolius@healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk or call **0300 303 8554**.





Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire	www.healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk
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Silsoe	 @Healthwatch_cb
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Healthwatch **Central Bedfordshire**